

## Kitsap's 'Drug Court Saved My Life'

By Josh Farley

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PORT ORCHARD — When 17-year-old Michelle Jones entered Kitsap County's juvenile drug court, she told Judge Anna Laurie three things: "I am driven. I am ambitious. I have goals."

They were just words then, from a teen dropout who was caught up dealing and using Ecstasy and who faced felony drug charges.

But a year later, Jones, now 18, has a drastically different life. She's drug-free, working two jobs and taking neuroscience courses at Olympic College — filling her mind with chemistry rather than chemicals.

"I really feel like drug court saved my life," she said.

"Problem-solving" courts, which provide structure and treatment with the goal of keeping the defendant out of the criminal justice system, are not new in Kitsap. Both an adult and juvenile drug court began in 1999. But they're expanding into programs like Kitsap's pioneering juvenile mental health court, which was introduced in 2005, the first in the state.

"We try to give them the skills and the tools to stay clean and sober," said Carrie Prater, probation officer for the juvenile drug court. "To be able to pick themselves back up."

It all starts with a contract. A teen charged with a non-violent, drug-motivated crime signs a form: complete drug court and the charges are dropped. It will not be easy — the court often takes more than a year — and the motivation must come from within.

Treatment is rigorous. Random drug tests are common, occurring multiple times a week. The teen must come to court, attend school, therapy, and group meetings. The entire family is often involved. And to move onto each new "phase" toward graduation, bigger goals toward sustaining sobriety must be completed.

Failure to comply results in swift punishment from Laurie. Sanctions range from writing essays to incarceration, with tasks such as community service in between.

Kids also are more susceptible to screwing up than the adults.

“They don’t learn things the first time,” Laurie said. “Kids relapse, and we send them back in (to detention),” she said.

Also unlike the adult drug court program, there’s another treatment court option for kids: the Individualized Treatment Court (ITC), which is for those suffering from mental illness.

The juvenile defendants are screened by a therapist at the onset of their case. If they’re found to suffer from depression, bipolar disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, they could be eligible for the ITC, which includes a plan for treatment of the mental illness.

In its fifth year, the ITC has graduated six teens. The more seasoned juvenile drug court, which started the same year as the adult drug court in 1999, graduates 10 to 15 teens a year.

“The changes are extraordinary,” said Shannon Porter, probation officer for the ITC. “Once they come out of that fog of using (drugs), they begin to find out who they are.”

### **‘ARE YOU READY?’**

How drug court really differs from traditional court is the holistic approach. Each Thursday, Laurie and the rest of the drug court team — prosecutor, defense attorney, therapists, counselors and probation officers — meet in private before court to review each teen’s case.

Laurie gets the final call on sanctions, and when they go public later in the afternoon, “it’s a unified front,” said Mark Randolph, defense attorney for the drug court.

Laurie addresses each of the participants one by one each Thursday. Everyday teen stuff is sometimes discussed: the prom, procrastinating on homework, a first job.

Each shows the probation officers or counselors a piece of paper that shows they’ve gone to a “self-help” meeting for the week.

Then, she gives them the truth: if they’re cutting it.

Laurie began last Thursday with a young woman who had dark hair and subtle blonde highlights. As the girl stepped forward, deputy prosecutor Julie Gaffney informed Laurie she’s been charged with shoplifting and possession of drugs.

Laurie shows her the contract, and ensures she knows what she’s in for.

Laurie tells the girl she must live by four rules: be honest — even if you relapse, stop using, show up and “learn to pee in front of a stranger.”

“Are you ready?” Laurie asks.

"Yes," the girl replies.

Laurie holds up a file containing the charges against the girl.

"These will disappear if you successfully complete this," Laurie says.

The girl is welcomed, and the courtroom cheers. Laurie always leads the applause, no matter if they are praised or led away to put on an orange jumpsuit for time in juvenile detention.

Not everyone in the group has stayed within the court's guidelines. The court found that one young man hasn't been living at the address where he said he would.

Laurie ordered him to seven days in juvenile detention.

Still, Laurie made sure the rest of the 25 or so knew she was impressed with one aspect of his participation.

"He knew he was going to get in trouble, and he showed up anyway," she said.

More applause.

Those who are doing time for sanctions are brought into the corner of the court. One young woman, who had been lying about using, told Laurie she was not going to give up.

Laurie said she wasn't sure if she could believe her, but wanted to.

"My affection is freely given to all of you," she said. "But you have to earn my respect."

There are carrots as well as sticks in the juvenile drug court. Participants who progress are rewarded with \$20 gift cards they can use for gas or at stores. They can also get an "early out" card, where they get to appear before Laurie on Thursday first and then leave instead of sitting through the entire afternoon session.

It is difficult to estimate just how much the juvenile treatment courts cost. Prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges and the juvenile department each pitch in from their respective budgets, and aid also comes in the form of federal and state grants.

Laurie said the court is applying for a \$200,000 grant to double the size of the drug court, the closest thing to a price tag. But that doesn't take into account the fact that if the defendants weren't participating in the courts, they would still cost money through traditional prosecution.

**'YOU HAVE MY RESPECT'**

Jones, the 18-year-old, describes her transformation this way: “I could physically take care of myself before,” she said of living a life of selling and using drugs. “Now I can psychologically take care of myself.”

Graduating after a year and two days in the program, Jones took the witness stand before the rest of her fellow participants Thursday.

For her, there would be no more urine tests, and more importantly, no more charges. But there is much more in her life — and some red velvet cake to celebrate the accomplishment.

“You have my respect,” Laurie told her. “I am proud to have known you, proud to have been a part of your life.

“You know these felony drug charges?” Laurie asked her, holding up her file.

Jones, an aspiring research scientist, nodded.

“They’re gone,” Laurie said.

